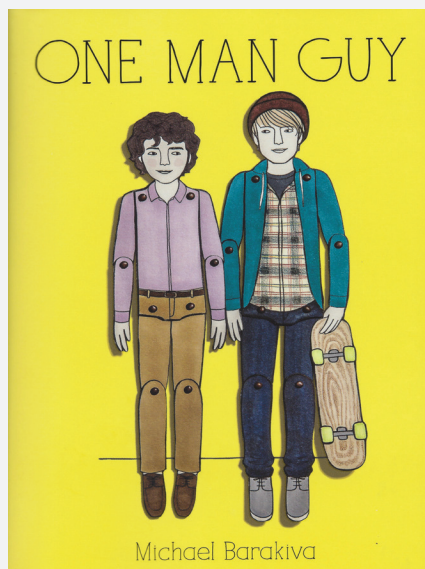


## First Opinion: Trouncing through the Tropes: A Coming-of-Age/Coming-Out Novel

Barakiva, Michael. *One Man Guy*.  
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Print.

*Robin Kurz*



In his debut novel, Michael Barakiva introduces the world to fourteen-year-old Armenian American Alek Khederian. Along with the usual woes of American teenagers, Alek must also contend with rather overbearing parents who are intent on ensuring that Alek remains true to his Armenian roots, regardless of how their decisions affect his own wishes and desires.

The novel opens with Alek, his older brother Nik, and their parents in an Italian restaurant. During the dinner, Alek is informed by his parents that he will be going to summer school, not because he failed any courses, but in an effort to stay on the Honor Track after he allowed his grades to slip. Not only does this news mean Alek will miss the family vacation, but he'll also have to give up tennis camp. This first chapter sets the tone for much of the book, during which Alek often clashes with his parents and their Armenian ways, only to relent without much of a struggle. His best friend, Becky, provides occasional comic relief, as she sympathizes with her friend's plight.

Once summer school begins, Alek discovers that the situation may not be entirely hopeless, as he finds himself sitting next to the uber-cool Ethan, legendary for a recent cafeteria

food fight. Soon, Ethan whisks Alek away from their New Jersey suburb for a New York City day trip to see Rufus Wainwright perform in Central Park. Alek realizes Ethan is gay and that he might be gay as well. As their relationship progresses, Alek breaks more and more family rules (with Ethan's encouragement) until the novel's dénouement.

*One Man Guy* has several strengths that will appeal to teens. It works equally well as both a coming-out and coming-of-age tale. Barakiva also highlights the tensions children of first- or second-generation immigrants navigate between traditional ethnic communities and "*these Americans*" (35). The descriptions of Armenian food (including a recipe for stuffed grape leaves) and the sights and sounds of Manhattan are realistic and well executed. With careful handling by an engaged and insightful teacher, the novel could open the door to thoughtful discussions on topics as diverse as genocide, parental responsibility, bullying, and prejudice.

The novel is problematic on several fronts. Although marketed as "a romantic, moving, laugh-out-loud-funny story" (jacket flap), the book fails to deliver any of these things consistently. Besides a too-good-to-be-true ending, *One Man Guy* presents a protagonist who never really seems to struggle with his sexuality. Part of this perception may have more to do with the book's third-person point of view; yet, Alek himself comes across to the reader as inconsistent, rather than questioning. This inconsistency applies not only to his thoughts on his sexuality, but also to his moral compass. On his first trip into the City with Ethan, Alek almost ends their new friendship because of his need "to do the Right thing" (89). Yet, several times throughout the book, Ethan actually breaks the law (in some cases, Alek does as well) and his lack of compunction is absent.

The book is rarely funny and only occasionally moving. Some of the scenes may try to be funny, but usually they fall flat. In addition to awkward transitions between many chapters, stilted or unrealistic dialogue breaks the book's pace and may pull teens out of the reading experience. Ethan is the source of the novel's most improbable dialogue, though the conversation between Becky's parents could serve as an example of how to beat a reader over the head with a trope. Serious events, such as bullying and stealing, occur in the book, yet pass with little mention. Family fights also seem anticlimactic.

Barakiva dances the thin line between characterization stereotype and caricature throughout the novel. Ethan is a borderline manic pixie dream guy. Becky, who often comes across as the sharpest character in the book, inexplicably throws herself at Alek because she never thought he might be gay, and then immediately accepts that he is and moves on. All of the parental figures are problematic. Alek's parents, in particular, read like over-the-top representations of Armenian American culture. While they may come across to cultural insiders as authentic, they may come across as boorish and prejudiced to readers without background knowledge.

In the end, the novel is a series of tropes in search of more originality. There is no shortage of coming-of-age YA fiction, and there's a growing body of coming-out YA titles (for some

of the best-known written examples, see David Levithan). With *One Man Guy*, Michael Barakiva offers a window into a culture seldom seen in literature for youth, but teen readers may find the experience more frustrating than illuminating.

### **Works Cited**

Barakiva, Michael. *One Man Guy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Print.

### **About the Author**

**Robin Kurz** is an assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Management at Emporia State University. She has taught a variety of graduate courses on youth and adult resources and services for public, school, and academic library settings. An active member of several professional organizations, including the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), she has presented nationally in the areas of collection development for diverse populations, equitable library access, and multicultural library resources and services for youth.